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AUTHOR Arias, Ileana
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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the literature on the role of mediating cognitive factors in marital functioning and satisfaction. Types and patterns of causal attributions of distressed and nondistressed couples are compared and the effectiveness of various intervention models is discussed. The materials also discuss the role of unfulfilled expectations as a source of marital dissatisfaction. The impact of faulty perception on behaviorally oriented marital therapy is examined and the need for further research on cognitive variables is emphasized. In addition, the author describes current research investigating the relationship between perceptual accuracy and marital satisfaction. (JAC)

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Cognitive Processes Influencing Marital Functioning

Ileana Arias

Department of Psychology

State University of New York

Stony Brook, New York 11794

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Cognitive Processes Influencing Marital Functioning

Marital research within the behavioral and social learning traditions generally has focused on patterns of communication and the ratio of positive to negative behaviors exchanged between husbands and wives. However, the role of mediating cognitive factors is central to the social learning view of human functioning. That is, social learning theorists claim that an individual does not respond to the environment per se rather the individual responds to his/her perceptions and interpretations of the environment (Bandura, 1969). The social learning model of human behavior then requires an understanding of: (1) what environmental cues are attended to during interaction; (2) if and how an individual decides what cues must be attended to; (3) how the individual organizes the information; and (4) how the selective attention and organization of cues affect behavior.

Cognitive components of optimal marital functioning (itself often subjectively and idiosyncratically defined) traditionally have occupied a secondary role in behavioral models of marital functioning and marital therapy. However, increased attention has been focused on the assessment (Eidelson & Epstein, Note 1) and modification (Baucom, Note 2; Epstein, in press) of cognitions possibly related to marital interaction and satisfaction. This recent interest on cognitive variables is due to: (1) the acknowledgement that variables such as beliefs and attitudes can attenuate the effectiveness of behavioral interventions (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979); (2) the growing interest among behaviorists on cognitive factors; and (3) the search for the most effective therapeutic interventions. To date, research on cognitive factors related to marital functioning has focused on the content and the role of: (1) causal attributions for self and spouse behaviors and marital difficulties and (2) unrealistic beliefs about and expectations for the self, spouse, and the marriage.

It has been hypothesized that dispositional or global, stable, and internal attributions for negative spouse behaviors and/or marital conflict would result or, at least, be related to dissatisfaction with the spouse and the relationship. That is, a husband who attributes his wife's behavior to a mean or nasty personality or disposition might experience more distress and hopelessness about the future than one who attributes the same behavior to his wife's bad day at the office. With the exception of Fincham's recent study (Note 3), there has been no direct comparison of distressed and nondistressed spouses' causal attributions for negative spouse behavior or for their marital difficulties. Most of the available empirical studies have used nondistressed dating or newlywed couples. In addition, due to the correlational and/or retrospective nature of the available research, the issue of causality remains an issue. Nonetheless, these studies offer some clues as to the types and patterns of causal attributions made by intimately related partners as well as to questions that should be addressed by future research.

Orvis, Kelley, and Butler (1976) asked couples to list recent examples of their own and their partners' behaviors, which were problematic for the dyad, and to list their own explanations for their behavior and their partners' behavior. Dispositional explanations were used more often by subjects to account for their partners' behavior while situational explanations were used more often to account for their own behavior. However, this finding was reversed for positive dispositional explanations such as concern or love for the partner. Such positive dispositional explanations were more frequently used to account for own behavior than partner behavior. The Orvis et al. results suggest that either a "self-preservation" bias was operative or that individuals create explanations for their partners' behavior to maximize the predictability of their behavior. In a careful review of the literature, Miller (1981) illustrates the stress-reducing effects of predictability of aversive events.

Doherty (1982) had newlywed couples discuss and reach a consensus about

18 vignettes, describing other couples' problems, from the Inventory of Marital Conflicts. For the wives only, there was a significant relationship between negative trait and intent attributions and negative behavior toward the spouse during the problem solving task. However, this relationship is difficult to interpret since the relationship was really between negative behavior toward the spouse and negative trait and intent attributions accounting for the behavior of the actors portrayed in the vignettes. Madden and Janoff-Bulman (1981) also found a significant negative correlation between the extent to which spouses were blamed for marital difficulties and subjects' marital satisfaction. However, the sample consisted of wives only and the results are based on retrospection.

Fincham (Note 3) compared causal attributions for positive and negative spouse behaviors of distressed and nondistressed spouses. Distressed couples perceived the causes of positive behavior as being more specific to the situation and more uncontrollable than did nondistressed partners. This is exemplified by the infamous "yes....but" phenomenon. For negative behaviors, the groups differed on the globality dimension only, with distressed spouses perceiving the causes of negative spouse behaviors as being more global and pervasive than nondistressed spouses (confirmed by clinical observations of the popular "you always...."). In an analogue outcome study conducted by Margolin and Weiss (1978), pre to post changes for an attitudinal-behavioral treatment group (including rational restructuring aimed at reattributing marital difficulties to lack of skills rather than to a bad spouse) were significant on eight of the nine outcome measures. For both a nonspecific and a behavioral treatment group, pre to post changes were significant on only three of the nine outcome measures. Interestingly, the behavioral treatment was successful in decreasing negative behaviors only while the attitudinal-behavioral treatment was successful in decreasing negative behaviors and increasing positive behaviors.

Another possible source of marital dissatisfaction is unfulfilled expect-

tations. Not getting what was expected from a spouse or marriage could result in disappointment, disillusionment, and unhappiness. Epstein and Eidelson (1981) developed a questionnaire to assess spouses' unrealistic beliefs about relationships, such as the effects of disagreement, the ability to "read" another's thoughts, and the likelihood of change. This Relationship Beliefs Inventory and a measure assessing unrealistic expectations for the self were administered to a group of clinic couples. Unrealistic beliefs about the self accounted for a significant proportion of variance for subjects' preference for individual or conjoint therapy, with subjects who endorsed more unrealistic beliefs preferring individual therapy. On the other hand, unrealistic beliefs about relationships accounted for significant variance of expectations for improvement of the relationship, preference for type of therapy, desire to maintain the relationship, and marital satisfaction. All significant results were in the expected direction.

In a subsequent study, Eidelson and Epstein (Note 1) administered the Relationship Beliefs Inventory and the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test to both distressed and nondistressed couples. The distressed subjects endorsed significantly more unrealistic beliefs about the destructiveness of disagreements and partners' ability to change than nondistressed subjects. For the discordant group, all unrealistic beliefs about relationships assessed were related to marital satisfaction. For the nondistressed subjects, unrealistic beliefs about the destructiveness of disagreement and the ability to read another's thoughts were related significantly to satisfaction; however, there was no significant relationship between satisfaction and beliefs about the likelihood of change. The authors concluded that the unrealistic beliefs tapped by their instrument and endorsed more frequently by their distressed subjects "appear to be part of a maladaptive cognitive set regarding marital functioning," (Note 1, p. 11). This "maladaptive cognitive set" might be extended beyond marital

functioning or relationships per se to include the spouse. A cognitive set is a hypothesized set of conclusions about the environment, thought to affect:

- (1) information processing (by sensitizing the individual to environmental cues that correlate with information already stored by the individual) and
- (2) behavior (such that responses that are appropriate given the processed and stored information are elicited) (Argyle, 1969).

Argyle (1969) proposed a "motor skill model" of interaction in which an individual begins with a goal or desired outcome and his/her knowledge of the environment or cognitive sets. According to Argyle, the goal and the individual's past experiences determine what environmental cues are perceived or attended to and, in turn, his/her interpretation of the situation. Given certain interpretations, the individual then engages in some response aimed at achieving the goal. If the impact of the individual's behavior does not match his/her desired outcome or desired impact, Argyle argued that the individual must reassess the perception and interpretation of the situation or his/her choice of behavioral response. For example, suppose that a husband would like the house to look tidier and wants to communicate this to his wife and to get the wife to commit herself to helping him make the house look tidier. Perhaps, while contemplating how to best approach the situation, husband recalls instances when he tidied up and instances when wife tidied up. Instances of husband tidying up are more available to him (since he was always there and actively involved) than instances of wife tidying up. Thus, husband may conclude that he cares more about the house's appearance than wife. Husband tells wife that he would like her to care more about the house's appearance and help him pick up around the house. Wife gets angry. Where did husband go wrong? Perhaps, as already mentioned, he failed to notice additional instances of wife picking up mess. Or, he did not take her busy schedule into account. Or, still, he erroneously concluded that wife does not care about the house's appearance. My experience

with discordant couples suggests that spouses do not usually second guess their perceptions or interpretations of situations; they hardly question their choice of action. Husband in the present example is more apt to conclude that wife's angry reaction is a result of her inability to accept criticism. Thus, he develops a cognitive set about his wife's ability to deal with criticisms and requests for change. Consequences of such a set could possibly be that husband will get angry prior to approaching wife with criticism or request for change. Under such circumstances constructive criticism usually becomes destructive and requests become demands. Wife might accurately perceive this and react angrily herself thus confirming husband's beliefs.

Spouses perceive things in each other that we, as outsiders, do not see. Likewise, they sometimes fail to see things that we can see. Floyd and Markman (Note 4) had distressed and nondistressed couples discuss two vignettes from the Inventory of Marital Conflicts and the primary problem area in their marriage. Spouses rated each others' communication as did outside raters. Nondistressed spouses rated each others' communication more positively than outside raters. Distressed wives, on the other hand, rated their husbands' communication more negatively than outside raters while distressed husbands' ratings of their wives' communication were more positive than outside ratings.

Arias and O'Leary (Note 5) gave discordant and nondiscordant spouses 14 marriage related concepts such as understanding and commitment. Each of the concepts was defined by ten phrases generated by experienced marital therapists. For each concept, participants were instructed to choose three of the ten definitions that best described how they defined the concepts and to choose three of the ten definitions their spouses would choose to represent how they (the spouses) defined the concepts. Thus, prediction accuracy, perceived or assumed similarity of definitions, and actual similarity of definitions were assessed within each group and compared. Discordant and nondiscordant groups did not dif-

fer on actual similarity. However, discordant spouses perceived less similarity between them than nondiscordant spouses. In turn, the discordant spouses were not as accurate as nondiscordant spouses in predicting their partners' responses. Regression analyses showed that perception of similarity was the most potent predictor of marital satisfaction and quality of communication. Further, perceived similarity was able to account for a significant proportion of variance in marital satisfaction beyond that accounted for by communication deficits. Thus, perceptions proved to be a variable worthy of further investigation.

This research was correlational and so does not resolve the issue of causality. In fact, we proposed that perception of dissimilarity may result from discordant spouses' repeated unsuccessful attempts at problem solving, possibly due to lack of skills. However, even if faulty perceptions result from behavioral skills deficits, they seem to exist and behaviorally oriented marital therapists are becoming increasingly aware that faulty perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, etc. impede discordant spouses from adopting more effective patterns of interaction (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979; Margolin & Weiss, 1978). Hence, such cognitive variables should be addressed by research and therapy. Interestingly, Gurman (1975) found that posttherapy marital satisfaction was unrelated to positive changes in the self, actual positive changes in the spouse, length of treatment, or pretherapy levels of functioning. Rather, Gurman found that posttherapy satisfaction was significantly related to perceived changes in the spouse. Further, participants in this study attributed positive changes in the relationship to change in the spouse possibly implying that pretherapy spouse behavior was the "cause" of the marital dysfunction.

Currently, at our clinic at Stony Brook, we are investigating the relationship between perceptual accuracy and marital satisfaction. The design of the project calls for the assessment of behavior, affect, and cognitions. This study then intends to look at the relative and unique contributions to marital satisfac-

tion of each of these types of data. If cognitive factors are able to account for unique variance in self-perceived and self-reported satisfaction, clearly future research should be directed toward the understanding of spouses' perceptual worlds so that we can better help them understand the processes to which they are susceptible and which they might be able to modify.

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